



Judge's award honors adoption advocate

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**By John Agar
The Grand Rapids Press**

When the late Judge John P. Steketee retired a couple years ago, a young man who was adopted as a boy offered a touching tribute.

He thanked the judge for overseeing his adoption, then said: "I love my life."

"One of the most rewarding things my dad did in his professional career as a judge was planning and finalizing adoptions," his son, John W. Steketee, said Friday.

"He had pictures and Polaroids (of children and their adoptive families) all over the walls."

In his father's honor, adoption advocates and families gathered Friday night to present the first Judge John P. Steketee Adoption Hero Award to his long-time colleague and friend, Ron Apol.

The award was part of "Adoption Celebration 2003: The Many Faces of the Family," sponsored by the Adoptive Family Support Network, at Grand Rapids Children's Museum.

The late judge's children presented the award. In a statement, his children -- John Steketee, Martha Steketee, Betsy Fenner and Joseph Steketee -- said: "We wholeheartedly support the AFSN in establishing this award to provide just such a testimonial in the name of our hero: our father."

"I think what's really nice is that it honors a fellow my dad worked closely with for a number of years," John Steketee said. "It's a very nice tribute to Ron."

Apol spent the past 30 years working in the Kent County court system, first as a juvenile probation officer and later as supervisor/court referee in the permanency planning department. He currently is consulting with the United Way's Connections for Children project.

"It's tremendously rewarding to have worked on behalf of children," Apol said. "When you spend all these years working in the child protection system, you see some things that are pretty disturbing. But when you look around and see all these wonderful families that have been brought together, it makes it all worth it."

Described as Steketee's protege, Apol shared Steketee's concern for the need to find permanent homes for children who often were left in the system too long. They developed a permanency planning model that was adopted at the state level, and served as a national model.

Apol said one reason for their success is the Kent County area embraces the idea of adoption.

Locally, 72 percent of the children involved in special needs situations -- where parental rights are terminated -- are placed in permanent homes within two years, and 80 percent of those children are placed within six months.

"People around the country hear those numbers and they don't believe them," he said. "But this community responds."

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